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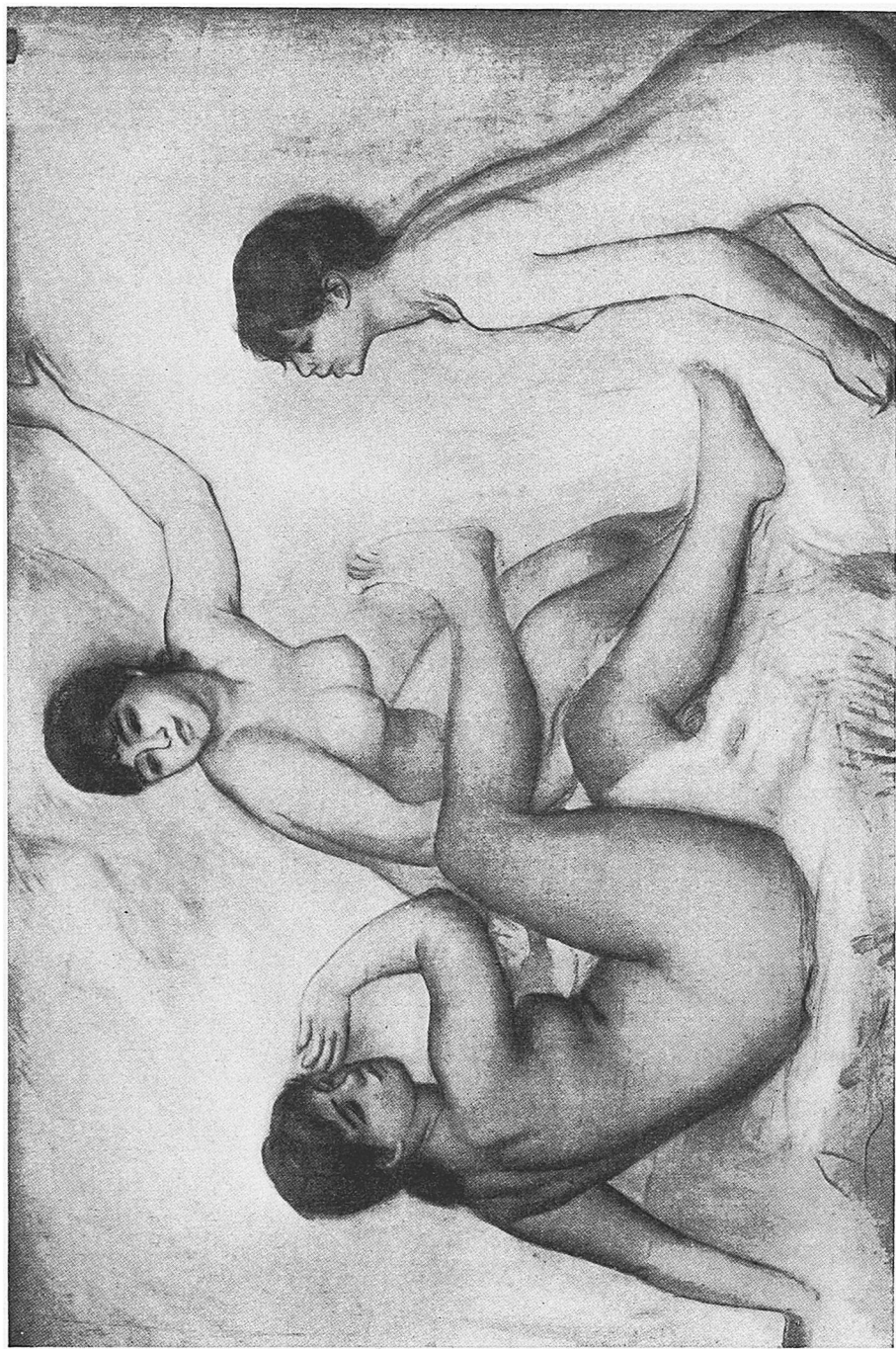
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From the latest photograph, taken recently, of the noble Renoir



Drawing,

Renoir.

How I Came to Know Renoir

By Ambroise Vollard

It was in the spring of 1895. I wanted to know the name of the model who had posed for a picture of Manet I had just then bought. The picture represented a middle-aged man with a gray hat, a mauve jacket, a yellow waistcoat, white trousers and polished black pumps; I was forgetting a rose on his button-hole. Let us add that this singular model was camped in the middle of an alley of the Bois de Boulogne. They had told me, "Renoir ought to know who that is." I went therefore to Renoir's, who, at that time, occupied an old house in Montmartre named the "Chateau des Brouillards." In the garden, before the house, a nurse with all the air of a Bohemian was rocking a baby. She passed me into the hall of the house and asked me to wait. Some moments after, a lady appeared, still young, plentifully round and good-natured, reminding me of certain pastels of Perroneau when he represented the bourgeois of the time of Louis XV. It was Mme. Renoir.

How is this? You have been left there, this damp weather, they did not bid you come in! Gabrielle?

Then the nurse, much surprised at the reproaches her mistress was addressing her:

Why it is full of mud outside—she was observing my crusted shoes—and then, the Boulangère * forgot to replace the mat before the door!

Mme. Renoir made me enter the dining-room and went to inform her husband. While waiting for Renoir, I had a chance to examine and admire the canvasses on the wall, the most beautiful female nudes I had ever seen.

But Renoir was not long in coming; I had before me a thin man, with extraordinarily penetrating eyes, very nervous, giving the impression of not being able to remain still.

* The surname of a model of Renoir's.

I am very busy—he said—in what can I be of service to you?
I told him what had brought me.

Your man, it is surely M. Brun, a friend of Manet's.

Then, without transition!

But we shall be more at ease for talking upstairs! Will you come up to my atelier?

It was the most banal of studios,—certain incongruous pieces of furniture, a scrap-heap of cloths, some straw hats that the painter had the habit of crushing between his fingers before placing them on his models. On every side, canvasses, turned one against the other. I observed, besides, near the model's chair, a pile of numbers of a review, still in their envelopes. I approached: it was the "Review Blanche," a review of "Jeunes," which at that time had its hour of celebrity.

Here is a very interesting publication! said I to Renoir, for I remembered having read in it several eloquent eulogies of impressionistic art.

My word, yes! answered Renoir. And I am very grateful to the young people who are kind enough to send it. I confess I have never opened it, but it serves me admirably to rest the foot of my model.

Renoir had seated himself before the easel, and had begun by opening his color box. I had already had occasion, at this date, to visit several painters' studios, and I was immediately struck by the extraordinary propriety within this color box of Renoir's. The palette, the brushes, and even the tubes, flattened and rolled as they were emptied, all this had an appearance of neatness almost feminine, or rather, such as presented, I suppose, the professional utensils of the fashionable painters in the eighteenth century. Not a splash of dirt, not a stain, on the brush handles, no more than on the painter's coat-sleeves.

(And how this impression was to be still fortified in me when, the following year,—and precisely through Renoir's good offices,—I was to be admitted to the intimacy of Cézanne, who, he, could never prevent himself from spreading at least as many colors on his brushes and clothes as he put on his canvass!)

I told Renoir how I had been ravished by the nudes decorating his dining-room.

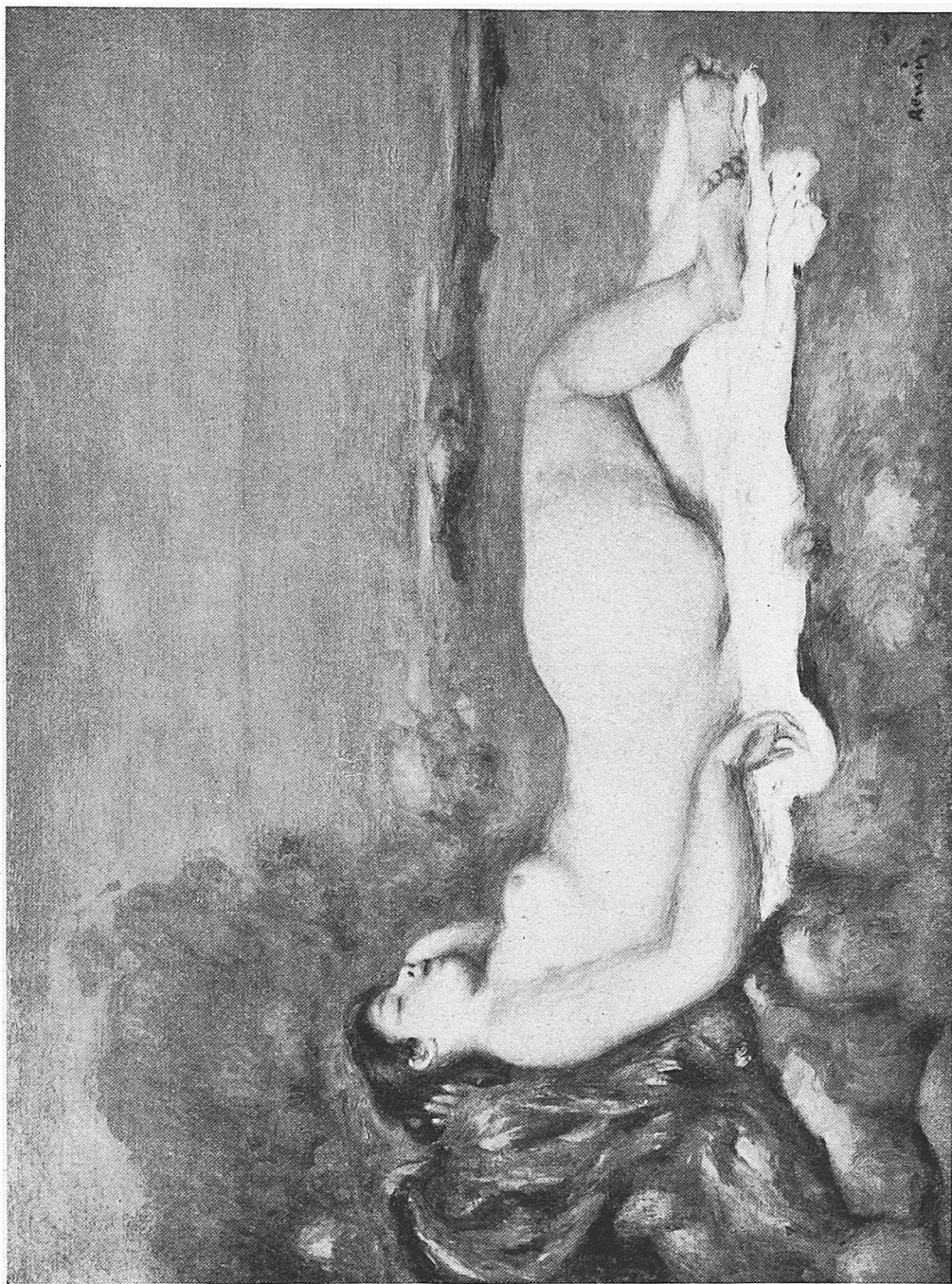
They are studies of my servant-maids, he answered. I have had some who were admirably made, and posed like angels. But I must add that, on this score, I am not particular. I am very well satisfied with the first comer . . . so long as I find a skin not



Portrait of Cezanne,

Renoir.

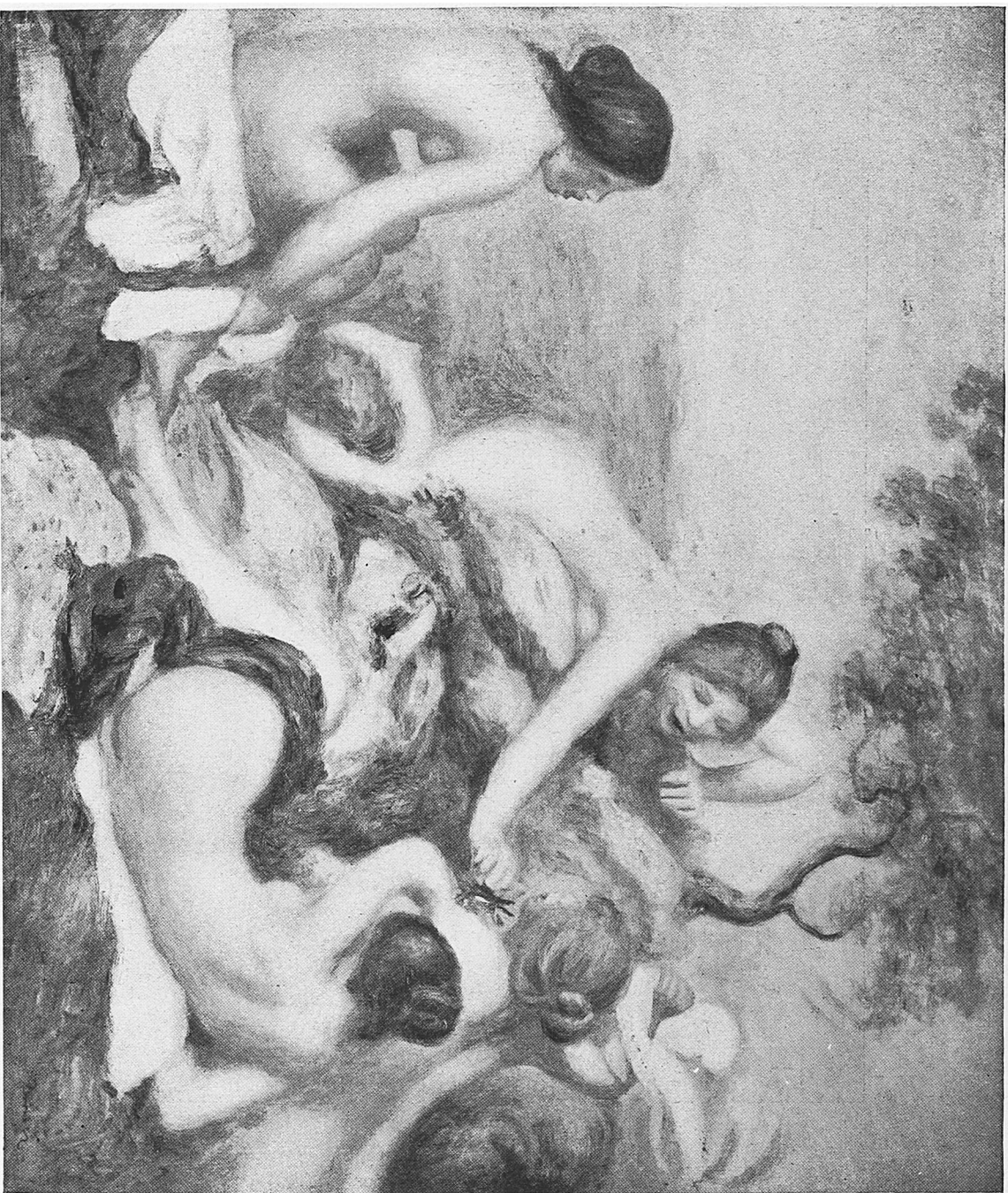
Courtesy of Messrs. Durand-Ruel.



Baigneuse,

Renoir.

Courtesy of Messrs. Durand-Ruel.



Baigneuses,

Courtesy of Messrs. Durand-Ruel.

Renoir.



Jeunes Filles,

Renoir.

Courtesy of Messrs. Durand-Ruel.

altogether too repellent to light. I do not know how others manage to succeed in painting tainted flesh! They call that fashionable elegance! Why the truly fashionable women themselves, how rare it is to find a hand amongst them which really gives you an itch to paint! It's so fine to paint them, women's hands, but really, hands that engage in domestic work! . . . In Rome, at the Farnesine, there is a Venus by Raphael coming to ask something of Jupiter; she has stout arms, it's delicious; a good fat gossip, one feels, about to return to her kitchen,—which caused the famous Stendhal to say that Raphael's women are common and heavy! He, too, evidently, dreamed of distinguished carcasses!

The rest of that day's talk with Renoir must have been rather common-place, for the truth is, I have kept no remembrance of it. I only remember that, pretty soon, my visit was ended by the arrival of a model. Before leaving, however, I asked the painter if I might return to see him.

As much as you like! he said, but come preferably towards evening, when I have finished my day's work.

The fact is, Renoir's existence was regulated like that of an employé. He came to the atelier with the same punctuality as a clerk to his office. I must add that he went to bed early, after a game of checkers or dominoes with Mme. Renoir. He would have been much too afraid, in keeping late hours, to spoil his next day's session. To paint has been his sole pleasure all his life, his only recreation.

I shall always remember, apropos of this, the meeting I had, towards 1911, with Mme. Renoir, who was hurriedly coming out of a hospital where Renoir was to undergo, that same day, a rather delicate operation.

"How is he?"

The operation has been postponed till tomorrow,—Mme. Renoir told me—but I am in great haste, for my husband has sent me for his color box. He wants to paint the flowers they offered him this morning.

Renoir worked at these flowers all day, he was still working at them next morning, when they came to transfer him to the operating table.

Another time, in 1916—Renoir was then well into his seventy-five years—in the course of my stay at his home in Cagnes, I was suddenly struck by his pensive air, with even something of uneasiness in his eyes. Some hours before, I had left him almost gay, and I now found him so sombre! . . .

The next morning, at breakfast, he had the same look. Who would have guessed that the cause was still due to this frightful war, over which I remembered having often seen him much pre-occupied? But in the afternoon, the nurse came to seek me in the garden:

Monsieur says to come up to his atelier right away!

I find Renoir before his easel, a radiant Renoir. . . . He had a brush in his hand, and was struggling with some dahlias. I have been asking myself for the last two days, he said, if painting was not an art positively too difficult for me. But glance a bit on what I have just done! Tell me, is it not almost as brilliant as a battle by Delacroix? Ah, I truly believe that, this time, I hold at last the secret of painting! . . .

The permission Renoir had given me to come and chat with him was too precious for me not to have hastened to profit by it. On the following week, I returned to his house immediately after my dinner. He had just turned into bed, but nevertheless consented to let me enter the room. I asked him if he was ill.

No, he answered me, but being alone this evening I have gone to bed, and, as I fear I may be bored, Gabrielle is going to read me *La Dame de Montsoreau*.

But *La Dame de Montsoreau* was not to be found.

Come, Gabrielle, said Renoir, look around a little, and see what there is in the library.

Gabrielle opened a panel wherein were inter-mingled about twenty volumes, and enumerated, one by one, *Cruelle Enigme*, *Peints par eux-mêmes*, *Les Lettres à Françoise*, *Les Fleurs du mal*. . . .

Renoir, interrupting: One of the books I detest most! I do not know who it is has brought me that book again! It's like the other things Gabrielle has just named. My friends have always wished to make me swallow a pile of stuff; but one ends by sniffing at it, don't you think?

Gabrielle had resumed her enumeration: *La Rotisserie de la Reine Pedauque*, *Mon Frère Yves*, *La Chanson de Gueux*, *Les Misérables*. . . .

Renoir listened, very indifferent. But, when the title of this last work was mentioned, he made a gesture with his hand, as if to push away something hideous.

I—They say that Hugo's verses are very beautiful. . . .

Renoir—One could only be crazy to say that Hugo has no



Jongleuses,

Renoir.

Courtesy of Messrs. Durand-Ruel.



Still Life,

Courtesy of Messrs. Durand-Ruel.

Renoir.

genius, but his art, such as it is, displeases me, and the hatred I bear him rests above all on the fact that it is he who has disaccustomed Frenchmen from talking simply. Nobody has contributed as much as that man to spread amongst us, from top to bottom of the social scale, the disastrous conviction that, to express oneself well, it is necessary to be affected and "literary." . . . Gabrielle, you must go to a bookshop tomorrow, without fail, and buy me *La Dame de Montsoreau*.

Then, addressing himself to me:

Do you know that master-piece? There is one chapter, notably, that one where Chicot blesses the procession. . . .

Monsieur, Gabrielle suddenly cried, here is a volume of Alexandre Dumas!

Renoir's face brightened.

Ah, let's see that.

And Gabrielle announced: *La Dame aux Camelias*.

Never in this life! protested Renoir. I detest everything the son has written, and this book in particular. I have always held in horror these sentimental pufferies!

Translated by E. C.

Thou art the rose of Sharon,

The lily of the valleys,

Come out, my love, my fair one,

The young moon dallies.

—Yvor Campbell.